

BAL GANDHARVA

a tribute

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Translated from the Marathi by Sai and Arun Joglekar

The era of the Marathi musical begun by Annasaheb Kirloskar has come to an end with the passing away of Bal Gandharva. Before the musical, the audience was satiated with the rough-and-tumble crude melodrama which was the usual type of play. Vishnudas Bhave had been responsible for setting a tradition of such plays. The intellectuals and those who had been newly introduced to the English language looked down upon this drama-form and hungered for something new. There was nothing truly aesthetic which could appeal to any one who expected more than entertainment from the theatre. It was in such bleak times, that Kirloskar introduced an entirely new type of entertainment and the Marathi theatre took on a glamorous and changed appearance. Drastic, though desirable changes were made in the story-form, dialogues, characterisations and decor. The musical play was launched. It may be said that Kirloskar's *Sangeet Shakuntal* was born out of an intense urge to reform the Marathi drama.

Stage Reforms

Annasaheb Kirloskar was also a great producer. His choice and handling of themes, the dramatic element, verse, characters, actors, sets was in impeccable detail. His work revolutionised the Marathi stage. The first performance of *Shakuntal* completely won over not only the simple unsophisticated theatre-goer, but the discerning, and hard-to-

please intellectual as well. He remains a loyal theatre-fan to this date. Undoubtedly *Shakuntal* was the harbinger of the glorious days that awaited the Marathi theatre.

Encouraged by the unprecedented success of the premier of *Shakuntal*, Kirloskar founded his 'Kirloskar Natak Mandali'. It was considered 'in' to take one's family to attend a show put on by this Company. Dramatics and politics, often interlinked, became the favourite topics of discussion of the Marathi masses and Tilak and Kirloskar its heroes. Song and drama which had hitherto depended only on the patronage of princes, now flourished under popular patronage. For this the credit goes to the Kirloskar Company. Later, in Bal Gandharva's days, theatre arts reached new dimensions. One can say that the great work which was started by the Kirloskar Company, reached its heights during the reign of Bal Gandharva.

Bal Gandharva joined the Kirloskar Company in 1905. Theatre-goers praised his very first role, *Shakuntala*. For this the credit goes to Deval, who had rehearsed Bal Gandharva extensively. Deval did not remain in the company for long. He was short-tempered, and after a quarrel with Mozumdar, he announced that he was leaving the company for good. The task of rehearsing Bal Gandharva then fell to Chintoba Gurow and Ganpatrao Bodas. Bal Gandharva played Subhadra in *Saubhadra*, Vasantsena in *Mrichchakatik*, and Nandini in *Guptamanjusha*. The audience accepted him though it did firmly believe that Bhaurao Kolhatkar could never be replaced. Bal Gandharva impressed audiences with his charming looks and songs. Bodas remarked that Bal Gandharva's singing had both style and a sound technical base. However, his studied actions and mechanical moves did not go unnoticed.

Development of Style

Kakasaheb Khadilkar was made responsible for rehearsing Kolhatkar's *Premashodhana*. From here onwards there was a pronounced improvement in Bal Gandharva's rendering of his female roles. His Indira in *Premshodhan* especially thrilled audiences. Bodas says, "Dressed very simply as Indira, Narayan looked bewitching. We both excelled

in our respective roles. The Kundan-Indira scene in the 5th Act especially never failed to click.”

Bal Gandharva's unmatched popularity started from this point. He suddenly gained in fame. Khadilkar had noticed his latent artistic talents. Hitherto Khadilkar was well-known for his problematic plays of a fierce and fiery nature. The acquisition of a sweet-faced, melodious-voiced disciple tempted him to write a new musical—*Manapman* especially for him. Khadilkar-Bal Gandharva became the famous 'teacher-and-taught' pair on the Maharashtra stage. The Gandharva era was in the making.

The New Woman

Premshodhan became popular with audiences, especially with the young students. The Kirloskar tradition had now become stale and outdated. This new play was imaginatively written. It was a fantasy and the production was imaginative. The play being new, Bal Gandharva could not be compared to any previous actor. Indira had certainly impressed and Bal Gandharva already had a following. Govindrao Tembe said, “Women's education had brought a new change, an informality in their dress, their conversation, and behaviour. Learning had imparted a certain glow to their countenance. Bal Gandharva as he appeared on the stage was a typical example of this emancipated woman. He looked, walked, and talked like the modern miss. The educated and cultured strata of society identified Bal Gandharva with their own daughters or with someone from the family, and hence felt a tremendous fondness for him.” Fortunately, Bal Gandharva lived upto the expectations he had created in the minds of all spectators, with his winning ways, his polished manners, and his music.

When the Kirloskar company moved to Poona, more than half the gate collection came from college students. Tambe says, “Deccan College was the real elite college in those times. All the students were enamoured of Bal Gandharva. His musical programmes were often arranged and feasts, photo sessions, presentations of awards in his honour were a routine thing. The theatre crowd, and especially female impersonators in those times were looked down upon. However, Bal

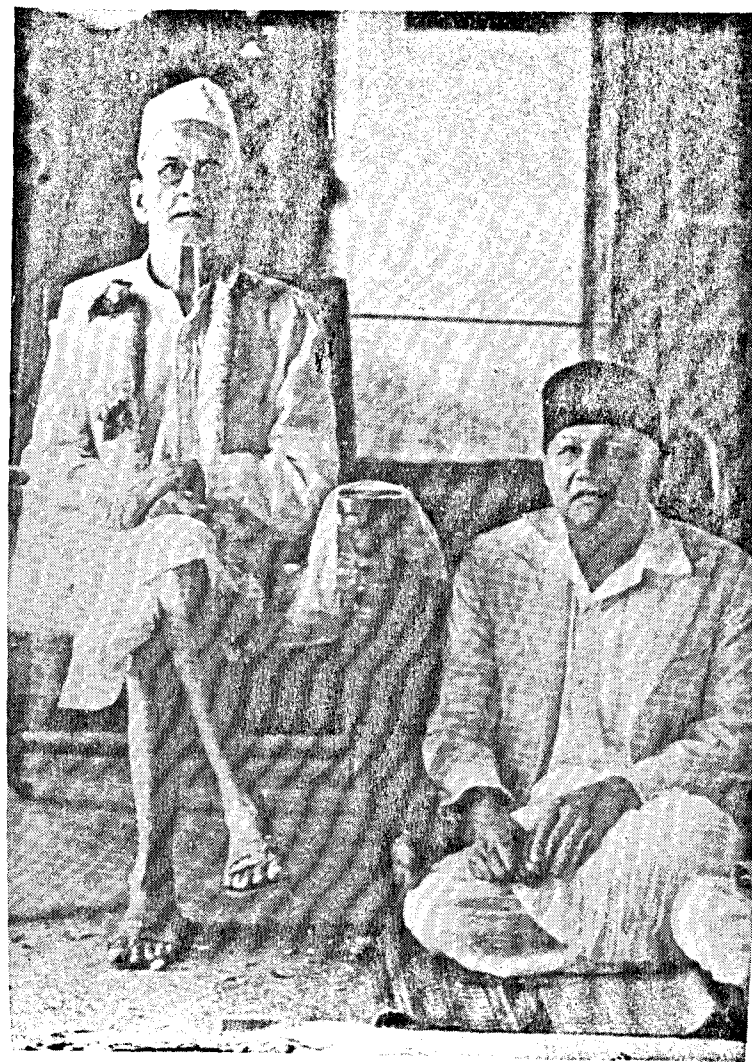
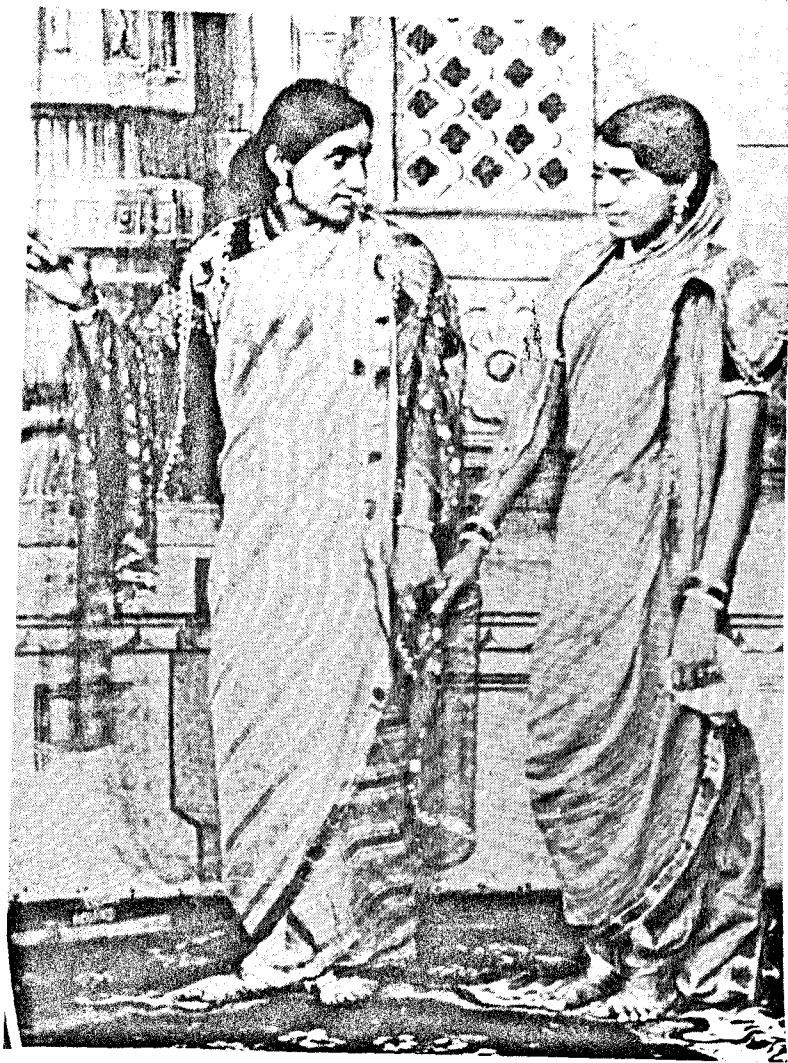
Gandharva's innocence, his loving and affectionate ways and polite behaviour won people over. They deigned to change their outlook in general. The actor was no longer a being for contempt. The college students later naturally got scattered all over Maharashtra, but they retained their youthful regard and affection for their idol. They remained loyal to him till the end."

Bal Gandharva's fame spread once the Gandharva Company was formed. Bal Gandharva became the 'ideal woman' for men and women alike. He introduced a new woman to society—tastefully dressed, well groomed, and uncluttered with ornaments. Feminine charm oozed from every gesture, every move. No wonder, the women all imitated him and copied him in an effort to improve their appearance. Bal Gandharva had only to wear a new type of sari, and the shops would be flooded by women demanding exactly the same article. This imitation was not only limited to the fair sex. The 'gandharva' fur cap became a craze, and adorned almost every male head. College students used to collect his photographs which were on sale at the theatre. Sons of rich men often insisted on being photographed in women's attire. The charges would then be four times the usual fees, for the photographer would have to dress up his clients.

Bal Gandharva's popularity soon spread to all strata of society. His acting and his music won over every true Marathi heart. No other artist of the Marathi stage has come anywhere near him in popularity. The fame of both — the man and his Company—had by now established them and consequently they were able to collect an amount of almost 2 lakhs of rupees from the rich farmers during a tour of the wealthy Berar district, and were able to repay an old debt. In Bombay and Poona, the dates had only to be announced, his fans flocked to the theatre for tickets. Indeed this adoration was not only confined to the Marathi

Photographs: P 61. Bal Gandharva as Rukmini in "Swayamvara" by K. P. Khadilkar. P 62. Left: Bal Gandharva (left) as Vasantasena in "Mrichchakatik" by G. B. Deval. Right: Kakasahib Khadilkar (left) and Bal Gandharva in their old age. (From the collection of the author)





people. Persons from other regions often crowded to see this remarkable artiste. The number of women in the audience was by no means negligible.

Universal Appeal

In the condolence meeting held in Bombay after his death, Mr. Shastri, the Deputy Commissioner of the Bombay Municipality remarked, "No artist ever attained the popularity of Bal Gandharva in my own province, Andhra. We bought the records of his music though we could not understand the words. Hundreds of houses possessed his records. Our elders would even travel all the way to Bombay to see his plays and to see him in person. I always dreamt of seeing his plays....."

It was considered a sign of good taste and sophistication to possess records of his stage songs. Gandharva Company left a stamp on every Marathi mind. His name was woven into the cultural pattern of the region.

Bal Gandharva was always surrounded by a galaxy of stars like Ganpatrao Bodas, Pandharkarbua, Vinayakrao Patwardhan, Master Krishnarao, Raghuvar Savkar, Shankarrao Sarnaik, Madhavrao Walawalkar, Gangadharpant Londhe, Shripadrao Nevarekar, Sadubhan Ranade, Deodhar and Bhandarkar. The velvet curtain, gold embroidered carpets, gorgeous costumes, ornaments and the lavish sets designed by Baburao Painter, all combined to create an atmosphere of luxury. Keshavrao Kamble and Kadar Baksh, provided the accompaniment the organ and sarangi, while Khan Ahmedjan Thirakawa played on the tabla. Whether it was the onslaught of musical excellence with which Vinayakrao Patwardhan and Krishna Master treated the audience or whether it was Bal Gandharva, his golden voice beautifully blended with the accompanying instruments — the result was a musical ecstasy never experienced before. Aladiya Khan Saheb used to say that whenever he felt like music, he would find his way to Bal Gandharva's plays. No wonder the music-loving common man — be he Marathi, Gujarati or South Indian, was completely hypnotised by the golden voice.

Group work

Maharashtra's love for music has been proved. Many a Muslim traditional singer from the North settled down in Maharashtra. Some even left courts for the simple straightforward appreciation of Marathi music-lovers. It cannot be denied that Kirloskar Company was responsible for making Maharashtra classical-music-minded. The Bharat Gayan Samaj was founded under the guidance of Bhaskarbua Bakhale, and the initiative of Nanasaheb Joglekar. During the Gandharva Company days, concerts and plays were arranged in aid of Universities. Bakhalebua, Master Krishna, and Bal Gandharva were often invited to various towns to give musical concerts. Master Krishna became a favourite with the people and Bal Gandharva most willingly granted him every facility. He was proud to have such excellent singer : actors like Master Krishna, Vinayakbua Patwardhan and Pandharpurkarbua in his troupe and did not grudge them their popularity.

In 1931, in a special Bal Gandharva issue of Ratnakar magazine, Vinayakbua Patwardhan wrote, "the Gandharva Company could be called a princely State. Bal Gandharva treated people with utmost respect and consideration and appreciated talent in others. No man ever left the company dissatisfied.

".....Bal Gandharva was most particular about how the people in his troupe dressed. He always bought superior material for all those in his employment, down to the minor characters.

".....The food served in the Company was very good. All ate the same food, there was no differentiation of any sort."

The public was infatuated with Bal Gandharva and showered money on him. He was never niggardly with money. He spent it all on the stage and his stage-artistes.

Maharashtra owes a lot to this man. It was he who put Marathi theatre on the all-India scene and socially, he taught women how to dress elegantly, and behave with self-confidence in their new-found role as emancipated citizens. He taught the importance of aesthetics to audiences and made Maharashtrians care for all that was pure, artistic and beautiful.

Bal Gandharva had been with the Kirloskar Company for a good 5 years before his first role was appreciated by the public. He had put in hard labour in his earlier days. His painstaking nature did not change once he had achieved success. He became one with the character he portrayed on stage. Therein lies the secret of his tremendous success.

K. T. Deshmukh has spent a lifetime in collecting material on the history of the Marathi Theatre. He has the largest collection of rare photographs of all the leading theatre-workers, actors, singers and productions available. He has organised several exhibitions of his collection. Shri Deshmukh also writes for Marathi journals.